1: Whiting E-5 (1936-1937) 1941
OJ13 Kwoma OJ13

CHAPTER I

ENVIRONMENT, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND PERSONNEL

THE Kwoma live in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea on the Peilungua Mountains just north of the Sepik River and 265 river miles from its delta.[1] This small mountain system, not more than twenty square miles in area, is bounded on the south and west by the Sepik and a lake formed from a former oxbow in the river, and on the east and north by the vast, rolling watershed of the river which stretches to the foothills of the coastal ranges. It consists of a primary orographical feature in the shape of a letter *S* plus a series of short arterial ridges running off in all directions. From tip to tip as the crow flies the system measures a little over five miles in length. The slopes of these ridges are precipitous; in climbing it is often necessary to dig one's feet into the earth or hold onto vines to avoid falling. A dense forest of large trees covers the ridges and extends down to meet a sago swamp just above the level of the Sepik. The highest point, Ambunti Mountain, rises 1,520 feet above sea level.

The elevation of the Kwoma territory is not sufficient to cause any noticeable variation from the strictly tropical climate of the entire Sepik River Valley. The daily range in temperature, from an average of seventy-one degrees Fahrenheit at dawn to eighty-five in mid-afternoon, closely approximates the norm in the river villages. Humidity is high throughout the year. Some rain falls virtually every day and all-day storms are not uncommon, but the climate and precipitation are so uniform throughout the year that there is no clear-cut division into seasons. Gardens may be planted, cultivated, and harvested at any and all times of the year.

[1] The tribe is situated approximately four degrees and ten minutes south of the equator and one hundred and forty-two degrees and forty minutes east of Greenwich.

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132 Although there is slight variation in the amount of rainfall within the annual cycle, during the months of December, January, and February the Sepik is in flood. This fact is of such importance to the river people that they divide the year into periods of high and low water. This seasonal periodicity is also noted by the Kwoma, but it is significant to them only in so far as it affects their commerce with the river people.

136 Cassowaries, wildfowl, hornbills, cockatoos, pigeons, and a great many unidentified species of smaller birds abound in the region. The only large mammal is the wild pig. The natives report that there were formerly wallabies in the region but that now there are none. There are several varieties of small tree-climbing marsupials. Many species of bats of different size despoil the fruit trees.

137 The flora of the region is tropical. The trunks of giant trees support a mat of foliage fifty to sixty feet in the air, so dense that the sun scarcely filters through it, except where the natives have cleared a garden or house site. The swamp land is full of sago palms whose thorn-studded spathes make passage difficult. Small stands of areca and coconut palms mark the sites of habitations past and present. Betel pepper vines cling to the pawpaw, breadfruit, and paper mulberry
241 trees which the natives plant near each dwelling. Many varieties of yams, taro, and greens are grown as a first crop in Kwoma gardens; these are followed by a second crop of bananas and plantains of numerous varieties.

142 The Kwoma are short, stocky, negroid people with long heads, dark frizzly hair, medium thick lips, and skin color varying from light to dark brown.[2] The homogeneity in physical type is immediately apparent, although there is one family with two generations of strikingly aberrant members, whose skin is so blond that it sunburns. The so-called Papuan, or Semitic, nose-form occurs at random about as often as the dished type. Noses with straight bridges, however, are the most common.

140 [2] Their average height is five feet four inches, and their cephalic index is in the upper range of mesocephaly (71.7 to 83.6, average 77.4). These figures were taken from twenty adult males.

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the general permissive attitude which a mother exhibits toward her infant suggests that she may also allow it freedom to discover this mode of gratification. On the other hand, the fact that older children are not permitted to masturbate in public might influence the mother to prohibit this type of behavior in her infant as well. The fact that both Kum and Merik, boys who were in the weaning period, fingered their genitals without being punished suggests a permissive attitude toward masturbation as perhaps the more plausible assumption.

Although a mother tries to protect her infant from pain inflicted by the natural environment, frequent experience with suffering is unavoidable. It is practically impossible for her to ward off the clouds of hungry mosquitoes that are continually present. The extreme temperature variations are often unpleasant. In the afternoon, with humidity at a maximum and the temperature around ninety degrees, the heat is stifling. By contrast, a damp foggy morning with the temperature at seventy is uncomfortably cold; I would shiver in a thick sweater while the natives huddled by their fires. Teething is another source of pain which every infant must endure. Yaws and malaria are prevalent diseases at Kwoma. Informants told me that no one ever grows up without contracting the former. Certainly few youths or adults can be seen who do not bear scars of yaws sores. The infant's physiological immaturity makes him for the most part dependent on his mother to help him cope with these natural pains just as he depends on her to feed him.

Crying is selected as the most effective response which a Kwoma infant can make both to pain and to hunger. It constitutes an injunction to the mother to discover the source of the trouble. Her first response is to present the breast. If this fails to quiet him, she tries something else. If she believes that the child is crying because he is too hot, she moves him away from the heat of her body. If she thinks he is cold, she cuddles him. If his crying calls her attention to a mosquito on him, she brushes it off and scratches the bite. If she suspects that sores from yaws are hurting him, she tries to move

123 Toward evening about a dozen of the natives had gathered around our
526 house and we went out to talk to them. Soon we were idly tossing stones. They threw by stiffly rocking their whole bodies back and holding their wrists stiff. They did bend their elbows, however. None of them could throw as far as either Tip or I, but their accuracy at short distances was amazing. Approximately every other shot would hit a small sapling about twenty yards away.

114 While Tip and I were playing cribbage just before supper, it began to
@ 132 rain-- a downpour with quite a strong wind. The house began to leak in various unsuspected places, pasticularly right over my head, where it came through with a gush and startled me. The storm lasted about half an hour when the wind shifted and the rain stopped. The wind is very peculiar here. It will blow up very strongly for about a minute and then will drop to almost an absolute calm for another minute.

796 Yesterday was supposed to be the second day of the singsing, but in the
764 morning Mar came to tell us that it had been postponed because someone had died the night before. He was a young man who had been sick for quite a while. We did not think it wise to be too inquisitive, but found out that he had not been buried, but "hung up". The singsing began again today however.

796 During breakfast we heard the gongs and chanting start, so we ate
[114] quickly and started down the hill. By this time the drumming and singing had stopped.

796 When we reached the house tamberan, several of the natives greeted us
346 and shook our hands. Everyone talked with a hushed voice, explaining to us that
778 the singsing had not yet begun. We were led up to the altar which had been
[123] rearranged since the previous day of the singsing. It was in the shape of an inverted truncated cone about four feet high constructed from net bags stretched

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482 their cigarettes.] While we were sitting there a group of women came by carrying firewood in their large net bags. Women carry large net bags with the handle across their forehead and the bag over their back. Men carry much smaller ones at their side with the handles over their shoulder.
562 The women went by us quickly with their eyes on the ground. When they were past us, they stopped and a couple of the older ones spoke to some of the men. They stood with their backs toward us, looking over their shoulders. We have observed this back-to pose several times before. I don't know whether it is an indication of their status with regard to men. They always seem to be uncomfortable when they are in a male gathering. Several times girls have gathered firewood for us to get pay in beads. They will dump their firewood quickly and stand shyly away from any group of men which might be there until they receive their pay. When we have seen them in their own house, they have seemed much more sure of themselves, but still tend to turn their backs to you and avoid your gaze. Old women
[855] are much less shy than younger ones. This situation is going to make it
[123] difficult for my special project, for children up to the age of four or five are constantly with their mothers. I guess it will be a matter of biding my time until I can make an entré into a family group. I feel confident that this will be possible.

114 November 13, 1936. On the nights of the eighth, ninth, and tenth, there
132 was a terrific wind blowing in gusts which shook the house with their violence. They blew our mosquito nets about and made it impossible to
[136] sleep. This wind also brought up a great cloud of hungry mosquitoes from the Sepik which made the days intolerable also, so as a result, we did very little work, but instead talked about how we wished we were home.

211 Tip made an excursion across the valley to the west toward Koriasi, and there found a rather interesting thing. He came upon a small clearing

It turned out the next
787 morning that the wife of Mar (Wof's adopted son and one of our houseboys) had become possessed by a spirit which was talking through her. The words she spoke were unintelligible this time, but often they can be understood.
[789] Such possession is used to detect thiefs. The voices heard were Wof exorcising this ghost. The general opinion was that the ghost was angry at him and so he remained in his house and shouted at the possessed woman in the next house to frighten the ghost away. He evidently was successful,
[115] for there were no dire effects. We got the account from the kids, so it
[614] is not very clear, but it gives us a lead. According to them only two or
[562] three persons in each sib can be possessed, and these are of either sex. What it means beyond this we don't know as yet.

114 December 3, 1936. It was a bright cool day today,; the temperature at dawn
[132] was 68 which is the lowest we have observed. This change buoyed up our
124 spirits considerably, and they were even more raised when Marok, who is probably the most respected of the older men of the tribe, and a person of striking dignity, came to pay us a visit. He had come around previously when we were working on kinship. We asked him who his father and mother,
[123] etc. were. He told us, but immediately asked us the same questions. When we told him, he repeated them over very interestedly, thus putting us all on an equal footing.

614 Today we started by asking him (Marok) what sunilawas meant, and
769 found out that there were four belonging to his sib (Sombundura). Long
[532] ago, each was an important man, and each is represented by a different mask which is exhibited in the house tamberan at the time of a ceremony. This suggested to him a list of plants and animals which 'belonged' to his sib: pig, gouria pigeon, cassowary, an edible leaf, and the large yam. These are in some way connected with their original ancestors, "they came up

614 [769] along man", but we could not make out just how. There was one fragment of a tale about men being originally pigs, but some of them developed hands and feet and became men. There was no trace of any taboo on eating these objects, but it nevertheless seems to be definitely related to the totem notion.

614 276 773 In discussing the totems of one of the other sibs, tobacco turned out to be one of the plants included. We quizzed him on this, and he insisted that the original ancestor had discovered it. It had come about in this manner: The original sib father had killed another man and from his blood a plant had grown. The sib father had tried to eat the plant, but it stuck in his throat. Then he dried it over the fire and smoked it, and it was very good. Later, people from all around came to get the seeds, but it had originated here. Our cook boy, overhearing the conversation, broke in at this point, saying that this was not straight, that Yambon (his place) 174 was the one 'belong tobacco'. This is fairly interesting in relation to 276 the controversy about whether tobacco was introduced by white men. If so, it was at least before Marak's time, and I should say he was sixty. And even more interesting is the fact that tobacco is a totem plant and has a myth of origin along with coconuts, yams, pigs, etc. This, of course, does not prove anything, but is some indication of antiquity, enough to put its origin before plantation owners settling in New Guinea; and why in the world should the traders and bird of paradise shooters bring tobacco seed with them?

132 133 December 9, 1936. This is Tip taking a turn at the journal.

How "time bilong high water" is setting in. The Sepik has risen a great deal and the swamp to the south is being slowly covered by its 132 overflow. The weather remains the same or a little better. We have had

132 several clear and fresh days and cool nights - wonderful for sleep. And
132 even more important is the fact that the mosquitos are very few. Why this
136 is so we have no idea. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to their
[825] comings and goings. The natives have a belief that they move in a body at this time from the river villages, Yambon, Malu, etc., up to the Hongwam where they stop for a time. Then they visit each of the other Kwoma settlements in turn before moving off to the north.

123 Our gathering of data in the last week has largely been influenced by events in the lives of individuals and ceremonial affairs. Plans for the day's work which we make in the morning often fall by the way before noon. For example, a week ago a small boy who is often about the house came running in to say that Mar, one of the Hongwam youths who fetches water and firewood for us, was dead. We had given him permission to go to his bush house and garden over near Ambunti Mt. two days before, and he had gone off in good spirits. This gave us a jolt. We asked if he were "dead finish". The answer came "no got, dead liklik dasol".

We packed a few medicines and immediately started out with a half dozen of Mar's kin over the same gruelling track which had nearly killed us several weeks ago. When we arrived we found Mar sitting near a fire list-
[753] less and moaning. They all agreed that it was a case of 'poison' because of the suddenness of the attack and because the patient could not 'talk straight'. Even we could notice that he was mouthing his words when we could get him to answer a question. He complained of intestinal pains, but no headache, and his temperature was exactly normal. We thought it best to get him back to his house proper and out of the wet swampy hollow where he was. He protested and did not have the strength to stand on his own feet.
123 We gave him a strong purgative. During this time Wof, his father's elder
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593 [353] 123 There were several stored in the thatch. Twice May took down the wrong ones and she was very cross with him. May did not answer but looked sullenly resentful. Kum was standing just outside the house looking down the path. After a while he came up near me, and I took him in my lap. He looked at me very intently saying nothing. His eyes were steady and unwavering. One finger was in the corner of his mouth. As I came up he stood near me for a moment and put his finger on my fly.

• 132 Someone yelled down the mountain. We all listened. The shouting was that rain was coming. I looked over the plain toward the sea and saw there was a big storm coming. For some reason this seemed to upset Wof and his wife.

578 A few moments later I saw Kaya looking down the path with a look of intense hatred. Her brows were contracted, her mouth pursed tightly, and her eyes looked unwaveringly. I wondered what it was and looked around and saw Chinuwa approaching. She came up slowly with a large mat bag of money which she started to unload. No one greeted her. Her presence was absolutely ignored, and Wof was glowering at the ground. Wof cursed and slapped savagely at a fly which lit on his leg. I felt rather uncomfortable because the situation was so intense. After a few minutes I left. May came with me, and when I got to the house, I asked what the matter was. It seems that Wof had found some of his food broken into and some of it taken. He asked Kaya if she knew anything about it and she said she didn't. Then he asked Chinuwa if she knew, and she would not answer, so he suspected her of stealing it and carrying it to another man for the purpose of sorcery. Almost as soon as I left, Wof's voice came up loudly. May said he was trying to find out whom she had taken the food to,